

SIUE ESLC Performing Arts' Kayona Brown Praises Jack Williams For Being Center Stage In Her Dance Education

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EDWARDSVILLE - It started with the love and awe of a role model (wanting to mirror her sister's characteristics and follow in her footsteps) that led the then four-year-old Kayona Brown onto a Southern Illinois University Edwardsville East St. Louis Center for Performing Arts studio dance floor.

It didn't take long for the child to also become enamored with the world of dance. That was 12 years ago, and the East St. Louis native is still practicing and performing with the program.

"My sister, Isis, brought me here when she came to practice dance, and I remember being thrilled," said 16-year-old Brown. "I kept coming back, because it was fun." Isis Brown, 24, is an ESLC for Performing Arts alumni student.

Performing Arts staff member Jack Williams, now program coordinator, was also a drawing card for Brown. The junior at Central Visual and Performing Arts High School in St. Louis, penned her thoughts about Williams as a result of an English assignment.



“Mr. Williams was my first-ever dance instructor, a big, tall, light-skinned man with a beard like Santa Claus and a cute pot belly,” wrote Brown in her essay, *Bittersweet Dancer Thoughts*. “He’s like a dad. He’s watched me grow up from the age of four. Dance class is only for ages 4-17, so now that I am 16, it feels bittersweet.”

Williams, who worked with younger aged students at the time, taught ballet and hip hop. “He was very nice, patient and caring,” recalled Brown. “He became another father figure to me, and I really trusted him.”

“From the beginning, I could see that Kayona had a love for dance,” said Williams. “She has shown herself to be committed, a hard worker and talented. It’s been great working with her for all these years.”

“I haven’t worked with Kayona as long as Jack has, but she has proven herself to be a gifted dancer,” said Performing Arts Program Director Homer Simmons.

“The dance room is my second home. I love it there,” wrote Brown. “So many fun memories, sprained ankles, tears, laughs. I never want to leave...The field trips to the City Museum and the feeling of working so hard that you might burst like a balloon. The performances at the end of summer and knowing that my mother is recording with a big smile, so proud of me... It is all so bittersweet.”

Brown, who has a 3.4 GPA, plans to go to college and study dancing. Her career goal is to become a dance choreographer.

“It is because of Mr. Williams and the (SIUE East St. Louis Center) Performing Arts program that I grew to be the dance student I am today,” she said. “I plan to make both Mr. Williams and the program proud.”

The [SIUE East St. Louis Center for the Performing Arts](#) has a long, rich history. The legendary dancer, anthropologist, and social activist Katherine Dunham founded the Center for Performing Arts at the SIUE East St. Louis Center in 1964. At its peak in the 1990s, the East St. Louis Center for the Performing Arts provided year-round instruction to more than 1,000 youth and became a training ground for professional artists of all disciplines. For decades, the East St. Louis Center for the Performing Arts provided performing arts classes to students and community members to develop local talent and to cultivate a love of the arts. Classes often culminated in musical and theatrical productions.

With a focus on empowering people and strengthening communities, the [SIUE East St. Louis Center](#) is dedicated to improving the lives of families and individuals - from pre-school through adult - in the Metro East. Head Start/Early Head Start and a charter high school are among the programs that offer the community renewed hope and an opportunity to reach educational, career and life goals. The Center also assigns first priority to encouraging, supporting and improving the educational success of the residents of East St. Louis and surrounding urban communities. The Center provides comprehensive programs, services and training in the areas of education, health, social services and the arts.